

COLLOQUY DOWNEAST HISTORY

In 2001, a small group of Brooklin neighbors made the decision to go forward with an idea they'd been batting around informally for a while. The concept was to create an adult learning community on the Blue Hill peninsula, organizing a series of short courses on a wide variety of topics, led by a facilitator expert in the subject, or an interested non-expert who would do research, design a syllabus, and select readings.

This would not be a traditional teacher/student relationship, but a partnership of interested peers coming together for guided conversation in an informal setting. Participants would be asked to prepare by reading the recommendations on a syllabus and arrive ready to engage in a mutual exchange of ideas and opinions. No special background would be required, only a willingness to be open-minded and ready to discuss and learn. Courses would meet once a week for four weeks, two hours each week, with a maximum of 15 participants each.

What to call the group? What's another descriptive word for conversation or discussion? Colloquy! Colloquies, offered in downeast Maine, hence it was decided...Colloquy Downeast it would be.

Brooklin's Ron Lesko, a retired political science and philosophy professor, was the original prime mover, along with Katrina Parson, Dottie Farrar, and Ron's wife, Linda Lesko. They led the initial push, and quickly recruited a steering committee of twelve local citizens eager to help get the project launched.

The steering committee set about compiling lists of possible topics and contacting people to run the discussions. "We are on the lookout all the time for people with an enthusiasm for a topic to be facilitators," said David Snow, an early leader.

Committees made decisions about how much to charge participants to cover expenses, organized space to hold the colloquies, and applied to the state for non-profit 501(C) (3) status. By-laws were drafted and regular meeting dates established. Kurt Stoll lent his computer expertise. The progress went smoothly, and Colloquy Downeast was officially on its way.

The Blue Hill Library's director, Rich Boulet, was extremely helpful initially, offering its meeting space and handling colloquy registrations. In the early years, colloquies were also held in various other public spaces, such as the Blue Hill Library, Parker Ridge, the Sargentville Chapel, Sedgwick Library, Friend Memorial Library, and several church community rooms. In recent years, most meetings have been held in The Howard Room of the Blue Hill Library.

The archives from 2001 – 2003 list six to eight colloquies per year. Beginning in 2005, the number of annual colloquies rose to a steady ten to twelve. Numbers of registrants have ranged from 23 one early year, to a peak of almost 160 during the 2016-17 season, divided among 16 colloquies.

A perusal of the CDE Archives on this site reveals the depth and breadth of colloquy topics over the years. Aeschylus. African-American Poetry. Jane Austen. Bach. Biodiversity. Buddhism. China. Chowder. Samuel de Champlain. Climate Change. The Cold War. Composing Music. Evolution of Feminism. Food in Film. Greek Tragedy. Geology of the Maine Coast. John Marshall. Gun Violence. Thomas Jefferson. Memoir Writing. Obituaries. Opera. Ovid's Metamorphosis. Picasso. Seaweeds. The Short Story. Sports Culture. The Supreme Court.

The Archives also list the names of facilitators, an impressive roster of local citizens who have been willing to donate time and expertise and share their knowledge.

To inform the public about Colloquy Downeast offerings, a publicity committee drafted informative press releases announcing the beginnings of Colloquy Downeast and local papers ran stories. They created colorful, eye-catching posters to hang around the the peninsula, and mailed out hundreds of their distinctive trademark golden-colored flyers listing upcoming topics. The CDE website, originally designed by local providers Michelle Keyo and Lisa Arhontes-Marshall, and kept up-to-date by Scott Miller, focused its effort on digital publicity rather than relying on paper mail. Mary Wilshire Magnusson drew the famous illustration on the website home page.

Lisa Lesko, M.D., daughter of Ron and Linda, described her parents' educational philosophy. "They firmly believed that collaborative conversation and the sharing of knowledge around a table enhanced the learning process to an enormous degree, resulting in an experience more powerful than what the more typical model of lecturer/student can deliver."

The original model holds, and the same mission and goals are still followed today. A group of committed and persistent volunteers continue to make a significant contribution to intellectual life on the Blue Hill Peninsula.

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